



Heine and the Composers

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Heine and the Composers

1. Self-scrutiny 1

We are in a cozy salon, soft in focus, lit with warm red, full of upholstered leather furniture in the best modern taste; the soprano, sober in a fur-collared jacket, gazes at us as the pianist plays the gentle prelude. There is something odd about the windows: the left window shows a somewhat jittery scene, as if there were a minor earthquake that no one was noticing; the right window shows the right eye and part of the mouth of the soprano's huge face.

2. Self-scrutiny 2

Heinrich Heine and Franz Schubert were born in the same year, 1797. If Heine had died when Schubert died, in 1828, it would have been an enormous loss to German letters and German music alike—for one thing, Wagner might never have written *The Flying Dutchman*, based on a brief satirical episode in one of Heine's novels. But the history of the German *Lied* might not have been drastically changed, because most of the lyric poems that inflamed the imagination of countless composers, not just in Germany, had already been published—many of them in the *Lyrisches Intermezzo* section of the *Buch der Lieder*.

Schubert didn't have much time to take note of Heine's work, but six of the fourteen songs in *Schwanengesang* (a song cycle compiled—not without skill—by a publisher after Schubert's death) are to texts by Heine. One of these songs is *Der Doppelgänger*:

Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,
In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;
Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen,
Doch steht noch das Haus auf demselben Platz.

Da steht auch ein Mensch und starrt in die Höhe
Und ringt die Hände vor Schmerzensgewalt;
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe -
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.

Du Doppelgänger, du bleicher Geselle!
Was äffst du nach mein Liebesleid,
Das mich gequält auf dieser Stelle
So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?

*

The night is quiet, the small streets still,
Here, in this house, a girl lived once.

She left the city long ago,
But the house still stands, just as it was.

And a man stands there, and cranes his neck,
His knuckles white, mouth agape,
I shudder as I come to look:
The moon shows me my own shape.

My double—pale companion-ghost!
Why do you ape my inner pain,
The torture of the love I lost,
The hurt I need to feel again.

This poem succinctly states Heine's whole lyric agon. The poet is drawn to revisit some scene of havoc and desolation, to re-live rejection, loss, pain, vain yearning. But he stands aloof from his own feeling, takes a restrained delight in cultivating a persona of ruin. Yeats once said that the traditional masks of the lyric poet are lover or saint, sage or sensualist, or mere mocker of all life; but Heine evolved a new and compelling mask, the lover as ironist at once rendered immune by his ironic distance, and yet intimately self-excoriated by his inability to take full part in his own feeling. (Heine's own description of his art was "malicious-sentimental.") In *Der Doppelgänger* it is far from clear which is the ghost and which is the real man: the poet himself may be the revenant haunting the place where he once felt authentic emotion, where some fragment of an authentic being still lingers to feel it.

Schubert's setting is based on a four-note figure: scale-degrees 1-♭7-3-2 in B minor, in slow, steady dotted-half-notes: B-A♭-D-C♭. This is the sort of figure more common in instrumental music than in songs: it might be the head of a fugue or the basis of a passacaglia—in fact Leopold Godowsky wrote a passacaglia on a striking, somewhat similar figure from Schubert's unfinished symphony (speaking of B minor!); Beethoven's piano sonata Op. 110 isolates a four-note figure only slightly different in shape from that of *Der Doppelgänger*; and the famous B-A-C-H figure (in English note-spelling, B♭-A-C-B) that haunts instrumental compositions by Schumann, Liszt, and Rimsky-Korsakov, not to mention many others, including Bach himself, is not far away either. In the song, the figure is an obsessive presence: first, in that the piano keeps repeating it in a simple harmonization (i-V-III-V, sometimes deforming to i-v-III-V⁷, with a corresponding drop of the figure's ♭7 to ♭7); second, in that almost every chord in the song contains an F♭, a dominant pedal, until the great *fff* chord on the second syllable of *Gestalt* ("The moon shows me my own *shape*"). The song's vocal line also begins on a monotone F♭, and shows a strong tendency to return to the note—again, until the word *Gestalt*, when it rises a semitone to G. The Doppelgänger and the poet are right next to one another, only a semitone apart, and yet belong to different harmonic universes: the *fff* chord is, in effect, a simple C⁷, but Schubert pushes it to an extremity of pallid horror.

This is the pattern for some of his other Heine settings. They tend not to have tuneful vocal lines—of course Schubert could write catchy melodies, such as *Heidenröslein*, almost a folk song by now, but a surprising number of his finest songs don't invite humming in the shower. For Schubert, Heine's texts invite declamatory gesture, a special kind of declamatory gesture that hovers anxiously in the forbidden

spaces near the tonic: a minor or major second below and above. *Der Atlas*, for example, a far more desperate and urgent song, sounds nothing like *Der Doppelgänger*, but it's confected to the same recipe:

Ich unglücksel'ger Atlas! Eine Welt,
Die ganze Welt der Schmerzen muß ich tragen,
Ich trage Unerträgliches, und brechen
Will mir das Herz im Leibe.

Du stolzes Herz, du hast es ja gewollt!
Du wolltest glücklich sein, unendlich glücklich,
Oder unendlich elend, stolzes Herz,
Und jetzo bist du elend.

*

I am the luckless Atlas! A world,
I have to bear the whole world of sorrows,
I bear the unbearable, and the heart
In my body wants to break.

Arrogant heart, you, you wanted this!
You wanted to be happy, forever happy,
Or forever wretched, arrogant heart.
It happened: you are wretched.

Here Heine uses an unrhymed verse form, derived from Horace, suitable for this classical theme; but unlike Hölderlin or (at times) Goethe, he doesn't try to make German sound like Latin by using dispersed syntax held together only the case-endings of the nouns and adjectives: instead all is tidy, iambic, regular, chaste in Heine's normal chastened manner. This Atlas of pain can't escape from his burden, and the poem can't escape from its tight-lipped, grim formality, although the loss of rhyme may provide the poem with a small solace.

Schubert, in finding a tone-equivalent, once again constructed the song from a four-note figure: scale degrees 1-3- \square 7-1 in G minor, harmonized i-i-V-i. This is the most ordinary harmonization possible, just a regular tonic-dominant movement. Schubert's early songs can be amazingly adventurous across the harmonic field: for example, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (1814) weaves its *distract* way through any number of keys; but some of his late songs are harmonically austere, for the sake of maximizing dissonance, not suppressing it. In *Der Atlas*, Schubert puts extraordinary stress on the F \square in the dominant chord, heightening its dissonance with G, the tonic note: it's as if Atlas sags a semitone under pitch under the overwhelming weight, then with a weight-lifter's grunt heaves the world back to its original position. Indeed in the vocal line, the singer sings only the first three notes of the figure—he needs to take a breath before resuming the tonic note. The song proceeds just as *Der Doppelgänger* proceeds: there's an episode based on rising chromatics (*brechen Will das Herz*—the comparable moment in *Der Doppelgänger* occurs at *Du Doppelgänger, du bleicher Geselle!*); and a climactic wail that takes the singer a semitone too high. He repeats the line *Die ganze Welt der*

Schmerzen muß ich tragen in an emphatic tonic arpeggio, rising through an octave, but then pushes past the G to A \square , harmonized to an *fff* B \square ⁷ chord—nothing particularly strange in itself (just a seventh chord in the relative major), but Schubert wrings the maximum dissonance out of that A \square abutted brutally against the preceding G. As at the climax of *Der Doppelgänger*, the startling glare of a major chord represents a spasm of pain after the habitual minor of the rest of the song: in a gasp of strength, Atlas lifts the world a little higher than it's supposed to be, before he sinks back into his usual dejection. But *Der Atlas* differs from *Der Doppelgänger* in one important way: *Der Atlas* is a highly rhythmic song, almost a sort of dance of sheer misery—Atlas juggles. Both the rhythm and the melodic contour of the four-note figure have a certain resemblance to the old tune called *La folia*, or *Les folies d'Espagne*, popularized long ago by Corelli, C. P. E. Bach, and other. It sometimes operates (as the title might suggest) as a badge of madness: for example, in Vivaldi's opera *Orlando furioso* (1727) the crazed Orlando sings *la, la, la* to the tune of *La folia*. I don't know if Schubert was conscious of the similarity, but the music may hint that the world's weight has driven Atlas mad.

Perhaps the most sophisticated of the six Heine settings in *Schwanengesang* is *Die Stadt*. The poem is quite similar to *Der Doppelgänger*, a visit to a significant extinct place—but in this case it's not the poet, but the city itself that's its own phantom double:

Am fernen Horizonte
Erscheint, wie ein Nebelbild,
Die Stadt mit ihren Türmen,
In Abenddämmerung gehüllt.

Ein feuchter Windzug kräuselt
Die graue Wasserbahn;
Mit traurigem Takte rudert
Der Schiffer in meinem Kahn.

Die Sonne hebt sich noch einmal
Leuchtend vom Boden empor
Und zeigt mir jene Stelle,
Wo ich das Liebste verlor.

*

On the far horizon
Appears, like shapes in a cloud,
The city with its towers;
The twilight's like a shroud.

A damp gust makes ripples
In the gray canal;
The oarsman rows my skiff
With *tempo mesto* pull.

From the world's edge rises

Once again the sun
And shines upon the place
Where I lost someone.

The song begins in a state of sheer rhythmlessness. The piano shivers with faint arpeggios of a diminished chord—and score adds a tempo marking, *diminuendo*, as if harmony and tempo alike were an exercise in diminishing. As the voice enters, rhythm suddenly becomes quite pronounced, double-dotted chords in the tonic, C minor; the vocal line begins as little more than a monotone on G, occasionally rising a semitone to A \flat . The song offers little in the way of melody, little in the way of figuration—only the light finger-ripples of the diminished chord, and a declamatory voice, singing mostly on the tonic or the dominant note, lifting itself a half-step when stabbed by insight. Keats writes in a famous line, “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains”; and *Die Stadt* is about drowsy numbness interspersed with small tightenings, clenches. The paralysis is almost complete: the singer, having taken a boat into non-existence, illustrates his limbo with non-melodies, forms of talking-to-oneself carried out by other means. Of course it’s only an accident that Schubert happened to die soon after writing these songs; but they can appear to be at once a climax of his song-art and a repudiation of singing itself. If a song were to be much sparer than *Die Stadt*, it would be little more than reciting the poem aloud; perhaps only Othmar Schoeck, in *Lebendig begraben* (1927) advanced the art of the *Lied* into a condition even closer to speech. In *Die Stadt*, song is little more than speech’s *Doppelgänger*.

3. Clowns

In many of Heine’s poems, the extreme evenness of the meter cloaks a massive disruption of the time-scheme. Atlas is stuck in a bad place, where no Hercules will ever come to relieve him of the world’s weight; his lyric cry is strictly eternal. Similarly, in *Der Doppelgänger* and *Die Stadt*, the poet is like that character in Yeats’s *Purgatory* (1938) who helplessly watches, over and over again, the ghosts of his parents in the act of begetting him, his drunken father raping his mother, lit up in a ruined house, a catastrophe that happened once and for all and yet never ends. The poet keeps approaching an emotional fact he can neither bear nor dispense with.

But there is another side to this Heinesque condition of bombed-out stasis. In some of his poems, time, far from standing still, moves way too fast. In one of his poems Heine managed to convey both lethargy and acceleration at the same time:

Es treibt mich hin, es treibt mich her!
Noch wenige Stunden, dann soll ich sie schauen,
sie selber, die schönste der schönen Jungfrauen; -
du treues Herz, was pochst du so schwer!

Die Stunden sind aber ein faules Volk!
Schleppen sich behaglich träge,
schleichen gähmend ihre Wege; -
tummle dich, du faules Volk!

Tobende Eile mich treibend erfaßt!

Aber wohl niemals liebten die Horen; -
heimlich im grausamen Bunde verschworen,
spotten sie tückisch der Liebenden Hast.

*

It drives me here, it drives me there!
A few hours more, and I'll see my fill
Of her, beautifulest of the beautiful.
Why are you pounding so, my heart?

The hours are a lazy folk!
Thick complacent-schlepping slugs,
Gross and gaping, clumpish clogs—
Hurry up, you lazy folk!

Impatience drives me all but crazed!
The hours hate the wretch love-lorn,
They titter with a secret scorn
And, evil, mock the lover's haste.

This poem, too, was set to memorable music, not by Schubert but by Robert Schumann, in his *Liederkreis* Op. 24 (1840)—the song begins *Sehr rasch*, very impetuously, but its headlong velocity soon starts slowing, until it diminishes, at a fermata, to zero; then suddenly it resumes at full gallop. And Schumann will provide many other imaginative solutions to the riddles of Heine's poems.

Schumann, more than Schubert, attended to the note of self-derision in Heine's poems: Schumann creates highly articulate musical personae that not only scrutinize themselves but mock themselves (though, as with Heine himself, there's a certain safety in this subject-position: the fragment of your being that does the laughing has abstracted itself from your ridiculous lower self). A good example of a clown-song is *Der arme Peter* (Schumann, Op. 53/3, 1840):

1.

Der Hans und die Grete tanzen herum,
Und jauchzen vor lauter Freude.
Der Peter steht so still und so stumm,
Und ist so blaß wie Kreide.

Der Hans und die Grete sind Bräut'gam und Braut,
Und blitzen im Hochzeitsgeschmeide.
Der arme Peter die Nägel kaut
Und geht im Werkeltagkleide.

Der Peter spricht leise vor sich her,
Und schauet betrübet auf beide:
Ach! wenn ich nicht gar zu vernünftig wär',

Ich täte mir was zuleide.

2.

“In meiner Brust, da sitzt ein Weh,
Das will die Brust zersprengen;
Und wo ich steh’ und wo ich geh’,
Will’s mich von hinnen drängen.

“Es treibt mich nach der Liebsten Näh’,
Als könnt die Grete heilen;
Doch wenn ich der ins Auge seh’,
Muß ich von hinnen eilen.

“Ich steig’ hinauf des Berges Höh’,
Dort ist man doch alleine;
Und wenn ich still dort oben steh’,
Dann steh’ ich still und weine.”

3.

Der arme Peter wankt vorbei,
Gar langsam, leichenblaß und scheu.
Es bleiben fast, wie sie ihn sehn,
Die Leute auf den Straßen stehn.

Die Mädchen flüstern sich ins Ohr:
“Der stieg wohl aus dem Grab hervor.”
Ach nein, ihr lieben Jungfräulein,
Der steigt erst in das Grab hinein.

Er hat verloren seinen Schatz,
Dum ist das Grab der beste Platz,
Wo er am besten liegen mag
Und schlafen bis zum Jüngsten Tag.

*

1.

They twirl and whirl, this Jack and Jill,
From sheer joy they shout;
But Peter’s silent and stock-still,
His face as pale as chalk.

Jack kisses his bride right on the lips,

Got up in splendid fashion;
Peter chews his fingertips,
Not dressed for the occasion.

Peter mutters, inaudible,
Gazing with some alarm;
If I weren't so sensible,
I'd do myself some harm.

2.

"In my breast there sits a woe,
I think it might explode;
And where I stay and where I go,
I follow it, my goad.

"I hope for comfort at Jill's side,
I don't know what to say;
And when I look into her eyes,
I must go far away.

"It drives me to climb, up and up,
Until I'm all alone,
And when I'm on the mountain top,
I weep, still as a stone."

3.

Poor Peter totters down the road,
Pale as a corpse, shy and slow;
The passersby, they have to stop
And stare, and stare, and staring gape.

Girls whisper in each other's ear,
"He's stumbled from a grave, I fear."
Oh no, my pretty little one,
Into the grave he's stumbling on.

For him who's lost whom he'd embrace,
The grave's the best and surest place;
There he'll rest and safely stay
And sleep until the Judgment Day.

This is an unusual poem in that the situation ascribed elsewhere to the lyric *I* (mourning at the true love's wedding; leading a hopelessly blighted life in consequence) is ascribed instead to a third party, poor Peter. Schumann's treatment of Part 2 is of particular interest: it begins frantically—Peter seems a sort of Petrushka-puppet with his strings

jerked every which way; but, like the beginning of *Es treibt mich hin*, the impetus gets slower and slower until Peter is stopped dead, paralyzed on the top of the mountain—though at the very end there's a brief relapse into frenzy. The frenzy-figure can be heard as stylized laughing: the world's pointing a derisive figure at Peter; or Peter's pointing a derisive finger at himself.

Schumann's most searching engagement with Heine can be found in his incomparable cycle *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48 (1840—the same year in which every Schumann song here discussed was written!). We might start with (maybe) the most celebrated of its songs, *Ich grolle nicht*:

Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht,
Ewig verlornes Lieb! Ich grolle nicht.
Wie du auch strahlst in Diamantenpracht,
Es fällt kein Strahl in deines Herzens Nacht.
Das weiß ich längst.

Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht,
Ich sah dich ja im Traum,
Und sah die Nacht in deines Herzens Raum,
Und sah die Schlang', die dir am Herzen frißt,
Ich sah, mein Lieb, wie sehr du elend bist.

*

I don't complain, though my heart breaks from pain,
Love forever lost! I don't complain.
However you shine with adamantite light,
There falls no ray into your heart's night.
I've known that long.

I don't complain, though my heart breaks from pain,
In a dream I saw your face,
And saw the night in your heart's space,
And saw the coiling snake that eats your heart,
Dear one, I saw how wretched you are.

There is a rhetorical device called *praeteritio*: you mention something by announcing that you're not going to mention it. It's a strange kind of device, in that it keeps swallowing its own tail, somewhat in the manner of the Cretan liar, who announces that everything he says is a lie—a statement that is true if and only if it is not true. A poem that begins "I don't complain," and continues not to complain in an articulate and detailed manner, is obviously a complaint; and this sort of internal instability, self-contradiction, invites musical treatment, since the vertical structure of music (harmony, counterpoint) provides opportunities for presenting conflicting voices.

(I might note in passing that composers like irony better than metaphor: one of the reasons for Heine's popularity among composers is his comparative lack of interest in metaphor. There is a metaphor in *Ich grolle nicht*—the snake that devours the woman's heart—but Schumann pays no attention to it: the music refuses all invitation to slither.

Music is extraordinarily adept at rhetorical figures involving emphasis, but not adept at all in rhetorical figures involving transposition: the old rhetoricians of music, such as Kircher and Mattheson, had no trouble finding illustrations of anaphora, but had a lot of trouble finding illustrations of metaphor.)

The German verb *grollen* means *grumble, rumble, begrudge, resent, be angry with*; and the piano part of *Ich grolle nicht* consists of a continuous rumble of chords in even eighth-notes. The meter is common time, the key is C major—not only do I not complain, I’m not-complaining in the most candid of keys and the most usual meter. But things start to go wrong from the beginning. In the first line, when the singer sings *und wenn mein Herz doch bricht*, Schumann plays the Schubertesque game of raising the vocal line (at the syllable *Herz*) to a “wrong” note, A \flat , supported by an F minor chord. The uncomplained complaint is starting to twist the harmony, as it gropes for expression beneath the singer’s aplomb, his airy dismissal of his grudge; and more serious distortions follow: as we hear of the beloved’s diamond-splendor, the utter darkness of her heart—*Es fällt kein Strahl*—the piano plays an F \sharp major chord, 180 degrees away from C major, harmonically speaking. The augmented fourth (as from C to F \sharp) is, according to Western music theory, a forbidden interval, the devil’s own dissonance (*si-fa, diabolus in musica*, as the old rhyme goes); the singer may refuse to complain, but the devil is leering from the piano part. When we hear of the snake that eats the woman’s heart, we may think of her half as a victim, half as a temptress: she seems to be Satan and Eve in one. In Oliver Herrmann’s film *Dichterliebe* (2000), Christine Schäfer (the soprano whose monstrous countenance stares at herself in the manner I described at the beginning of this essay) sings *Ich grolle nicht* in a Berlin nightclub: as the song proceeds, she slowly writes on a blackboard, It’s easier to scratch your ass than to scratch your heart. It is as if the woman described in *Ich grolle nicht* had usurped the male singer’s subject-position; it is as if the snake were writing a little message to those who might regard the song as more sentimental than malicious.

It is hard to take a clear stance toward the poem’s speaker: he may be canny, fully aware of the irony of his own rhetorical maneuver, or he may be another of Heine’s clowns, trying to rise above his own abjection, but spilling out unconscious bile on all sides. But there is an odd sequel to *Ich grolle nicht* in the world of late-twentieth century opera, a moving clown-show by Michael Nyman, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1986).

Christopher Rawlence’s libretto to this opera, based on the famous case study by Dr. Oliver Sachs, depicts a celebrated musician who suffers from a neurological deficit called prosopagnosia—the inability to match perceived objects with mental categories. Not only does Dr. P mistake his wife for a hat, but he also continually chats with pieces of furniture and claps a friendly arm around mailboxes; so epistemologically damned is he that he even confuses his shoe with his foot—his own body is an alien presence to his confounded mind. At one moment in the opera, Dr. S[achs] shows Dr. P a glove and asks him what it is: Dr. P thinks, correctly, that it might be a container—but a container for what?:

Coins of five different sizes.
It’s a purse, a special purse. . . .
The pigskin case
Of some precious device

For the probing
Of my brain?

It is as if Dr. P lives in a dangerous realm, a world of scalpels, for every innocent object is a blade that cuts his innermost tissue, painfully reveals his inadequacy at matching concept with thing. Dr. P's daily life is one long psychological test, one long semantic game in which meaning always recedes before his blunt gaze.

Dr. P's salvation is his music: although he can no longer read musical notation, he remembers songs, and is still a brilliant baritone. Indeed he organizes his daily routine around song-cues, melodic sequences that inform his shaving, his eating, his bathing, his social relations, and so forth: since his system of visual recognition is almost extinct, he depends on a system of acoustic recognition instead. In other words, Dr. P lives in a kind of habitual opera, in which Schumann, Britten, and other composers "tell" him where to go and what to do, through an intricate file of arbitrary musical signs; Nyman has, in effect, only given a public musical expression to the private Singspiel of Dr. P's ordinary existence. Nyman decided to make certain Schumann songs the root material for his exploration of Dr. P's inner sound-world; and one of the high points of the opera comes when (at Dr. S's encouragement) Dr. P gives a splendid performance of Schumann's *Ich grolle nicht*. This scene illustrates a kind of triumph of musicality over the encroaching chaos of the rest of Dr. P's life—it is the psychological equivalent of the old myth, dear to musicians, that the firmament is established, the universe harmonized, by some divine act of creation-through-song, the music of the spheres.

But why did Nyman choose *Ich grolle nicht*?—Sachs made no mention of a particular organizing-song. Just as Heine's text mentions a snake that devours the heart of his beloved, there is a kind of snake in Dr. P's brain, eating away the foundations of his life. But Nyman, when accounting for his choice of this song, stressed the importance not of Heine's words but of Schumann's music:

I chose "Ich grolle nicht" partly for the appropriateness of its text but largely for its musical resources: unbroken sequences of repeated quavers [eighth-notes] are meat and drink to me . . . Thus, in the sequence following "Ich grolle nicht" . . . the harmony of the first four bars of the song is rhythmically re-articulated. But subsequently . . . bars five through eight undergo a gradual perceptual shift as the strong melodic line and its supporting functional harmony degenerate[] into figuration and mere pattern-making, losing its "representational" quality by a process of simultaneously speeding up the melody while slowing down the rate of harmonic change.

When Nyman explained how he abstracted, isolated, and brought into the foreground certain submerged elements of Schumann's song in order to provide the continuation of the scene, he offered the key to his opera. He abstracts Schumann's song, at once denuding it of all emotional content and seeking in its harmonic skeleton some source of physiological authority. In the fascinating duet immediately following the performance of *Ich grolle nicht*, Dr. S shows Dr. P a number of geometrical figures, testing his power of recognition of abstract shapes ("te-te-te-te-te-tetrahedron"); and Nyman's music is a sort of refaceting of the first four bars of Schumann's song, emphasizing the vacillation between the notes E and F in the top line of the piano accompaniment, and spinning off little chord-circuits whirligigging around Schumann's chord progressions. As Dr. S displays his tetrahedrons, Schumann's song is tetrahedralized, so to speak.

Much of the opera concerns the aesthetic value of abstractionism: at one point, Mrs. P shows Dr. S a series of paintings by Dr. P, some of which are representational scenes with a strong emotional content: “Displaced Europeans . . . The grief of survivors / The weeping and sobbing”; but, as Dr. P’s mental decline takes effect, the paintings turn increasingly cubistic, abstract. Dr. S describes these later paintings as worthless except as neurological revelations:

Painted gesture
Has degenerated in mere marks,
Lines without meaning,
Empty shapes . . .
I see the advancing pathology
Making no sense
Of the world out here

But Mrs. P is deeply insulted by these characterizations:

You’re an arrogant, ignorant man.
He progressed to the abstract . . .
Pure painful,
Painted emotion . . .
Feeling embodied in
Measured brushstrokes.

Now, Mrs. P has generally been an unreliable observer through the opera, eager to find excuses for her husband’s bizarre behavior; what are we to make of her opinion of his recent painting? One clue is found in Nyman’s musical settings, some of the most distinguished in the score. When Dr. S sings of the senselessness of Dr. P’s paintings, the music is repetitive, deliberately unmeaning—an orchestra of country fiddles making preparatory gestures toward a square dance; but when Mrs. P denounces Dr. S, defends her husband’s art, the music instantly, unmistakably, changes into stylized chromatic lamentation—one of the oldest code-gestures in Western music. Nyman evidently means that the painting varies in its meaninglessness or meaningfulness according to the observer: a neurologist will find it tellingly absurd (and therefore a confirmation of his diagnostic powers), a doting wife will find it a calculated expression of all the world’s suffering (and therefore a confirmation of her husband’s genius). The painting itself is little or nothing, only a blank surface on which contradictory interpretations proliferate, none better or worse than another.

This same observation might be made of the music of Schumann—or of Nyman. When Nyman deconstructed Schumann’s nobly emotive melody into monotonous bass-figures, he was searching, in a sense, for the song’s deepest level, where its meaning, however shrunken and impoverished, was most unassailable: the level where the song retained its Orphic power to organize reality for Dr. P. *Ich grolle nicht*, so to speak, was capable of thinking for Dr. P, of providing a pattern to govern his feeling and action; the song performed for Dr. P the same service that music performed for Wordsworth’s idiot boy:

As Conscience, to the centre
Of being, smites with irresistible pain,
So shall a solemn cadence, if it enter
The mouldy vaults of the dull idiot’s brain,

Transmute him to a wretch from quiet hurled—
Convulsed as by a jarring din;
And then aghast, as at the world
Of reason partially let in
By concords winding with a sway
Terrible for sense and soul! (“On the Power of Sound,” 1828)

By essentializing and reducing Schumann’s song, Nyman sought the ultimate source of music’s power to inform human intelligence—the minimum cadence, the basic code through which music operates on our nervous systems. *Ich grolle nicht* is abstracted until it has lost all complaint, all non-complaining, all emotional content whatsoever, until it has become a mere acoustic stimulus to motor and perceptual neurons; as Oliver Sachs himself noted,

In *Awakenings* I describe a patient, Edith T., a former music teacher with severe Parkinsonism, who constantly finds herself brought to a complete halt, unable to move unless or until she imagines a tune. She herself talks of being “unmusicked” by Parkinsonism, and having to be “remusicked” back into motion. Neurologists speak of “kinetic melody” here. But there is a “perceptual melody” as well, and it is this which is lost (among other things) in Dr. P, who sees the world as abstract, meaningless shapes, and can only make sense of it, proceed, when he is “remusicked.” . . . the real hero in “The Hat” is surely music—the power of music to organize and integrate, to knit or reknit a shattered world into sense.

It is as if, to Nyman, music becomes more physiologically potent as it become more stripped down, more minimal; he tried to uncover the controlling, corporeal root-language. Nyman quoted with approval a sentence of Roland Barthes’:

“In Schumann’s *Kreisleriana* (1838), I actually hear no note, no theme, no grammar, no meaning, nothing that would permit me to reconstruct an intelligible structure of the work. No, what I hear are blows, I hear what beats in the body, or better: I hear this body that beats.” (Nyman here slightly misquotes Richard Howard’s translation of Barthes’ essay “Rasch”)

But of course (as Barthes knew well) *Kreisleriana* is full of memorable themes, quite obedient to certain principles of musical grammar, and (to some extent) assigned a specific meaning by the composer; to hear in it only pulse-throbs and biceps-contractions (what Barthes called “somathemes” elsewhere in this essay) is to neglect a great deal of the far-from-negligible. What Nyman has done (in effect) is to recompose Schumann’s *Ich grolle nicht* according to the recipe of Barthes’ experience of *Kreisleriana*: to remove from it all that is not directly pertinent to the body. Barthes evidently conceived Schumann as a kind of Scarpia, beating, beating, beating on the body of his auditor; and it is interesting that Nyman congruently conceived the ideally sensitive listener of Schumann as someone who had undergone much physical and mental degradation. It is as if Heine’s Poor Peter, stumbling into the grave, punched senseless by the blows of fate, had become the prototype of the operatic hero in a state of extreme Postmodernist decline.

4. The self-canceling-out of art

In a notebook Kafka jotted the cryptic phrase “the self-canceling-out of art”—a procedure that Heine, a century before, had understood well. *Ich grolle out* is a self-canceling song in that it’s a complaining non-complaint; but other Heine poems extend the principle of self-excoriation to an excoriation of one’s own poetry.

Both of Schumann’s song-cycles based on Heine’s poetry, the *Liederkreis*, Op. 24, and *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48, conclude with poems in which the poet builds a sarcophagus for his own songs. This is first one—though Schumann, a great lover of myrtles, crammed a myrtle into the first line:

Mit Rosen, Zypressen und Flittergold
Möcht ich verzieren, lieblich und hold,
Dies Buch wie einen Totenschrein,
Und sargen meine Lieder hinein.

O könnt’ ich die Liebe sargen hinzu!
Auf dem Grabe der Liebe wächst Blümlein der Ruh’,
da blüht es hervor, da pflückt man es ab, -
doch mir blüht’s nur, wenn ich selber im Grab.

Hier sind nun die Lieder, die einst so wild,
wie ein Lavastrom, der dem Ätna entquillt,
Hervorgestürzt aus dem tiefsten Gemüt,
und rings viel blitzende Funken versprüht!

Nun liegen sie stumm und totengleich,
nun starren sie kalt und nebelbleich,
doch aufs neu die alte Glut sie belebt,
wenn der Liebe Geist einst über sie schwebt.

Und es wird mir im Herzen viel Ahnung laut:
der Liebe Geist einst über sie taut;
einst kommt dies Buch in deine Hand,
du süßes Lieb im fernen Land.

Dann löst sich des Liedes Zauberbann,
die bloßen Buchstaben schaun dich an,
sie schauen dir flehend ins schöne Aug’,
und flüstern mit Wehmut und Liebeshauch.

*

Make my book a black wood box,
Adorn with rose and golden flecks,
It shall be sufficient coffin
For the songs that I will put in.

I want to bury Love in that chest!

For on Love's grave there blossoms Rest,
A flower I would gladly have—
But blooms, I know, on my own grave.

Here are the songs I once belched up
Like lava spewed from Etna's top,
With blinding sparks and rumbles vast
From my heart's own pyroclast.

On these pages lie corpse-cold,
Dumb, cloud-pale, the words I told;
But they might kindle once again
If Love herself would enter in.

I feel my songs will soon renew
When Love upon them sheds her dew—
This book once opened by your hand,
My darling in a distant land.

If Love will chant her magic there
The letters of the text will stare
Imploringly on your fair face
And breathe a whisper of Love's grace.

This gentle poem is a model of reader-response theory: the song moulders in the book until the reader, the One Right Reader, ensorcells it, ensouls it. Its sequel, at the end of *Dichterliebe*, is far more ambiguous:

Die alten, bösen Lieder,
Die Träume schlimm und arg,
Die laßt uns jetzt begraben,
Holt einen großen Sarg.

Hinein leg' ich gar manches,
Doch sag' ich noch nicht, was;
Der Sarg muß sein noch größer,
Wie's Heidelberger Faß.

Und holt eine Totenbahre,
Von Brettern fest und dick;
Auch muß sie sein noch länger,
Als wie zu Mainz die Brück'.

Und holt mir auch zwölf Riesen,
Die müssen noch stärker sein
Als wie der heil'ge Christoph
Im Dom zu Köln am Rhein.

Die sollen den Sarg forttragen,
Und senken ins Meer hinab;
Denn solchem großen Sarge
Gebührt ein großes Grab.

Wißt ihr, warum der Sarg wohl
So groß und schwer mag sein?
Ich legt' auch meine Liebe
Und meinen Schmerz hinein.

*

The putrid, evil songs,
Bad dreams that will not stop,
It's time to dig a hole,
Time to coffin them up.

I won't say what they are,
But lots are going in;
The coffin must be larger
Than the Heidelberg Tun.

And for this coffin, fetch
Planks of the stoutest kinds;
It has to be as long,
Long as the bridge at Mainz.

And fetch twelve giants, oh,
Strong to lift huge stones,
Strong as that Christopher
Cathedraled at Cologne.

The giants heave the coffin,
Toss it into the deep,
For such an enormous thing
Only the sea can keep.

It had to be heavy, huge—
Shall I tell you why?
My pains had all to fit,
In it my love must lie.

Not so gentle. Schumann's setting (in the key of C♯ minor) begins with a huge gesture, a thrusting down the whole diapason by means of a figure prominent in both the piano and the vocal line: C♯–G♯–C♯. When the singer mentions the Heidelberg Tun, and the great bridge at Mainz, and the Köln Cathedral, the piano utters a little figure of glee, similar to figure that Wagner would use, ten years later in *Das Rheingold*, to represent the

arrogance of the dwarf-king Alberich, when he exercises the power of the Ring. It is a laughing figure, but, as elsewhere in Schumann's Heine settings, the laughter may rebound to mock the poet, at once burying his vile poems and subliminally congratulating himself at his stature—you need a really big box if it's to contain all *my* poems! The mood of the song softens toward the end: the emphatic gestures peter out into hesitant syncopations, as if the singer were regretting his hasty decision, in this loud palinode, to unsing his songs. (When Dante Rossetti, a few years later, buried the manuscripts of his poems in his wife's coffin, he was forced to exhume her body in order to publish them.) The song terminates in a long postlude for the piano in the tonic major, *Andante espressivo*, which might be regarded (1) as a sample of the defunct sad-sentimental lyric stuff that will trouble the world no longer, or (2) as a warm requiem-hymn over the poems' grave (Rest In Peace, my songs), or (3) as a strange moment of triumph, the song's quietly insistent refusal to remain buried, its assertion of its merit against the poet's own wishes—the song wriggles out of its marine casket and floats to the surface. Myself I incline to the last interpretation: great art has often been made out of art's confessions of impotence, inadequacy.

5. Bells

Heine spent most of his adult life in Paris, at first a voluntary exile from Germany, then (because of his liberal politics) an involuntary one. And Heine has always been a poet popular in France—indeed he may have influenced the course of French poetry, to some degree. If we look at the radical ironists of late nineteenth-century France, such as Jules Laforgue, a certain Heinesque note is sometimes heard:

Non, je resterais seul, ici-bas,
 Tout à la chère morte phthisique,
 Berçant mon cœur trop hypertrophique
 Aux éternelles fugues de Bach.

Et tous les ans, à l'anniversaire,
 Pour nous, sans qu'on se doute de rien,
 Je déchaînerai ce *Requiem*
 Que j'ai fait pour la mort de la Terre!

*

Devoted, alone, I'll stay here, ach!,
 With my dear consumptive dead,
 Cradling my hypertrophied head
 In the eternal fugues of Bach.

On her birthday I'll unfurl
 At my organ with squelched heart,
 Just for us, with my best art,
 This requiem made for the end of the world!

(*Complainte de l'organiste de Notre-Dame de Nice*)

This is more grotesque and brittle, technical, than any of Heine's poems, and yet the blasted lover who dramatizes his own ruin, the appeal to Judgment Day, both recall *Der arme Peter*—Laforge's various Pierrots can be considered as wispier, more artificial, more metaphysical versions of the Heine clown.

French composers, as well as German ones, were attracted to Heine. There's an excellent but little-known cycle by the Breton composer Guy Ropartz, *Quatre poèmes d'après l'Intermezzo de Henri Heine* (1899, translations by Ropartz and Pierre-René Hirsch). One of the most striking features of this composition is a bell that keeps tolling through the piano part.

Heine's poems seem to invite bells. Neither Schubert nor Schumann, in setting Heine, was particularly sensitive to such sonorities, though the four-note figure in Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger* might be considered a sort of knell. (And in the *Dichterliebe* film, as Schäfer sings Schumann's *Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen*, Hermann's camera observes a metronome ticking in the foreground, as if to remind us that the songs are all about Tempo, Time.) But Robert Franz's magnificent setting of *Ja, bist du elend* is based on a figure that's unmistakably an urgent chiming:

Ja, bist du elend, und ich grolle nicht;
Mein Lieb, wir sollen beide elend sein!
Bis uns der Tod das kranke Herz bricht,
Mein Lieb, wir sollen beide elend sein!

Wohl seh ich Spott, der deinen Mund umschwebt,
Und seh dein Auge blitzen trotziglich,
Und seh den Stolz, der deinen Busen hebt,
Und elend bist du doch, elend wie ich.

Unsichtbar zuckt auch Schmerz um deinen Mund,
Verborgne Träne trübt des Auges Schein,
Der stolze Busen hegt geheime Wund,
Mein Lieb, wir sollen beide elend sein!

*

Yes, you are wretched, and I don't complain;
O let's be unhappy together, my love,
Until death ends our sickly hearts' moan,
O let's be unhappy together, my love.

I see the mock that hovers round your mouth,
And see your eyes flash spitefully,
And see the arrogance that lifts your breast,
And yet you are wretched, wretched as I.

Pain twitches your mouth, imperceptible,
Hidden tears make your eyes muddy, grave,
The proud breast a secret wound conceals,

O let's be unhappy together, my love!

This reads like a revisiting of the psychic material of *Ich grolle nicht*, reconstituted in slightly different form; and in fact *Ich grolle nicht* is *Lyrisches Intermezzo* #18, and *Ja, bist du elend* is *Lyrisches Intermezzo* #19. Franz's setting is daringly monotonous: there is the chime-phrase, and not much else: each of the twelve lines is sung to roughly the same music, with a little sequential development. But Franz makes the monotony into a convincing image of harassed stasis, a misery that will never change, a misery in some sense treasured because it is the only form of intimacy that the poet and his beloved can hope to know.

In Ropartz's Heine cycle, the bell is intermittent, but when it tolls its four notes it makes its presence felt, because it turns the Bell motive from Wagner's *Parsifal* into a kind of *Dies irae*:

Depuis que nul rayon de tes yeux bien-aimés
N'arrive plus aux miens obstinément fermés,
Je suis enveloppé de ténèbres morales.
L'étoile de l'amour s'est éteinte pour moi
Plus de douce clarté, rien que l'ombre et l'effroi!
Un gouffre large ouvert me veut dans ses spirales
Nuit éternelle engloutis-moi!

*

Wo ich bin, mich rings umdunkelt
Finsterniß so dumpf und dicht,
Seit mir nicht mehr leuchtend funkelt,
Liebste, Deiner Augen Licht.

Mir erloschen ist der süßen
Liebessterne goldne Pracht.
Abgrund gähnt zu meinen Füßen.
Nimm mich auf, uralte Nacht.

*

Where I am is ringed with dark,
Dark so hollow, close, drear,
Since I lost the last spark
Of your eye's light, my dear.

Quenched forever is the sweet
Splendor of that gold starlight.
Abyss gapes beneath my feet,
Take me now, O primal night.

It is remarkable how often composers setting Heine, even composers not using a German text, default to a figure of four notes. It is time's chime, iterated into a kind of eternity; it is also Heine's normal tetrameter beat, liberated from the poem, turned autonomous. Heine himself, when he first published the *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, predicted that its poems

would attract composers; but his poems have had an odd way of making composers respect the purely poetic aspects of Heine's craft, those aspects of his craft that resist melody. A Heine song is often simply a kind of declamation superimposed on a bell-beat, as if the melody of the words themselves were so compelling that it repelled the sorts of tunes that composers normally invent.

To my mind, the most ravishing of all Schumann's settings of Heine is *Belsazar*, Op.57 (1840). The poem belongs to a peculiar class, a specialty of Heine's, the dehydrated narrative—a long story compressed into a few lines (another example is *Die heil'gen drei Kön'ge aus Morgenland*, set by Richard Strauss, Op. 56/6). To set Heine's couplet-version of the story of Belshazzar, Schumann used a recitation-figure, the sort of music to which a bard might chant an epic—a figure without any expressive character of its own, but pithy, lilting, full of a certain momentum. (The music for one of the old epic recitation-figures still exists, that for Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Titirel*.) But, remarkably, when we come to the climax of the song—the moving finger that writes on the wall, You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting—the melodic motion contracts almost to zero: the singer does little more than read Heine's lines out loud. I imagine Schumann, having written scores of masterpieces to Heine's texts in his annus mirabilis, 1840, grinning, sitting back, saying to himself, Heinrich, why do I have to do anything at all?—see, your poems compose their own music.